

# ROOTS-KEY

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*Lipman Family Photograph*

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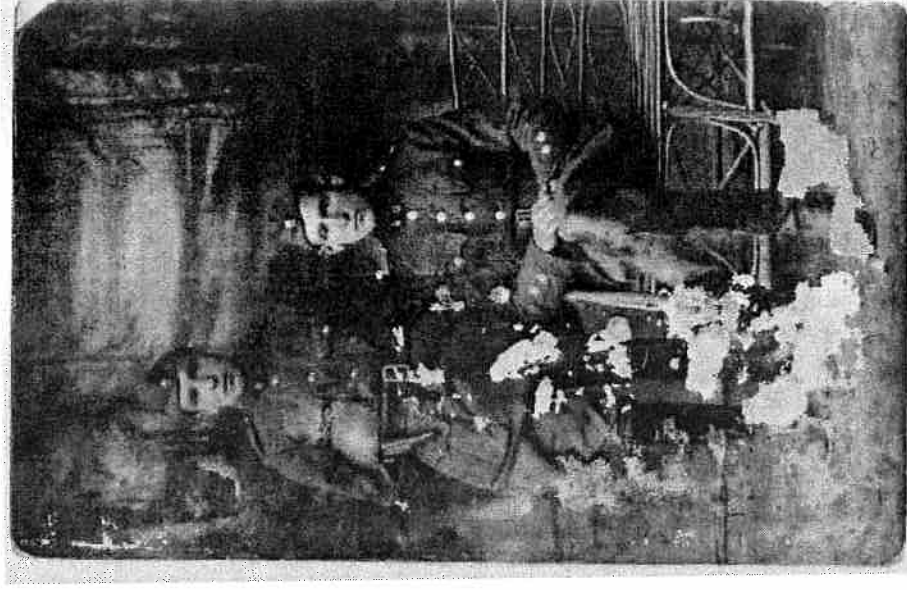
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# One Man's Search for Memory

by Grant Gochin

As a child I would sit at the feet of my Grandfather as he told stories of the "Old Country". I adored my Grandfather, a kind, gentle man, loved and respected by everybody that knew him. His passing in 1984 was a devastating loss for me, his memory a constant in my life. In 2001 my son was born and I began to realize the value of heritage, a gift to pass on to our future generations. I realized that I was beginning to forget my Grandfather's stories, and once they were forgotten his memory too would pass; for me and once this wonderful man alive in memory for future generations to keep this wonderful man alive in memory for future generations I needed to record his stories and thus pass them forward. I had no knowledge of Yiddish, and no context for the snippets of stories I could recall. I had visited Lithuania immediately after she regained independence from Russia in 1991, but I was just a tourist, visiting because my Grandfather was never allowed into Lithuania after the war.

I made contact with a Lithuanian researcher – Dr. Eglė Bendikaitė, a person who immediately captured my attention as an academic of significance, whose grasp of the history of Lithuanian Jews was immense and objective; she agreed to take on the project of researching my family history in Lithuania. We began by her translating the Yiddish on the back of my Grandfather's photographs, treasured mementos of a family no longer existing in the country in which they resided for almost 700 years. The data came quickly; snippets of memories returned and Eglė began



adding historical context. Memories of my Grandfather telling me of rummaging through garbage looking for scraps of food turned into records in the Lithuanian archives of their deportation into the Ukraine in 1915 in an attempted genocide of Jews (and others), a precursor to the Holocaust that was to come later. Jews were deported from Northern Latvia and Lithuania into the Eastern Regions of Russia and Ukraine simultaneously with the first enforced famine, causing massive death rates amongst the indigenous local population and especially amongst the now dispossessed Jews. My Grandfather's sister, Tsipa was amongst those that died of starvation, her death estimated in about 1919, as well as a brother and my Great Grandfather.

Archival records of their return into Lithuania showed the death of my Great Grandfather in Ukraine. Documents began to validate the stories of rebuilding of lives in a newer and more modern independent Lithuania where Jews were equal under the law, and a "Golden period" of life began for Jews.

A military historian enlarged a photograph of my Grandfather in his Lithuanian military uniform, and from there, we identified his military insignia. My Grandfather had told me stories of how he learnt to play musical instruments while in military hospital; he had the photos of himself in his ward. Eglė sought out the records of that military unit. There was my Grandfather's military file, his hospitalization records, his daily temperature readings. In a later trip to Lithuania, I visited the hospital ward where my Grandfather had been a patient. I stood in the spot where the photo was taken of him in his military hospital gown. The stories and photos became a living history.

My Grandfather had told me of how he and his mother had stood in line to register their Lithuanian citizenship. We discovered the original handwritten records where they were designated as "Jews" from the shtetl Papile. A later regime in Lithuania used these records to identify who were and who were not Jews. My Grandfather told me how he and his mother had traveled through Kovno (Kaunas) to get his sister an external passport; the official had suggested that his Mother Chaite obtain one as well, after all the official apparently stated, "you are here and you might as well." The passports were found, they were consecutively numbered. The records existed where my Grandfather accompanied his sister to obtain her internal passport in Papile.

I visited the Jewish cemetery in Papile, now a patch of land on only 25% of the territory it used to occupy, only four gravestones standing, not one of which was for the hundreds of relatives of mine that must be buried there. I put up one new gravestone in memory of all my ancestors that lay there, be they in the cemetery land still there, or under the apartment buildings built on the other 75% of the land.

There was a mass migration of Jews from Lithuania to the "Golden Medina" (South Africa); the South African records show my Grandfather's arrival in 1926, shortly after he completed his Lithuanian military service.

As Eglė was concluding her research, we compiled our findings,



*Kovno military hospital, 1924. Samuel Gochin is second from left, standing.*

and an oddity was a postcard written to my grandfather in 1922, signed "Your loving sister, Tsipa." No sense could be made of this postcard, a new mystery that needed solving. Examination of the card was difficult. Tsipa could have been Tsile, but more research was required. We discovered another branch of Gochins who had remained behind, and according to eyewitness reports, they were forced to dig their own graves and were murdered in 1941. Tsile, the author of the card and my Grandfather's first cousin, had been murdered, one amongst 6,000,000. An entirely new branch of research opened. I had to find out about this family; the list of children was available on the deportation re-entry records so we could see who had been murdered. One name, though, was missing. The youngest daughter Sarah had escaped into the forests, made her way through Russia and survived the war in Kazakhstan. Finding what became of Sarah became my mission. I discover that she was still alive, a very old lady, still living in Zurich.

I wrote to Sarah's daughter and returned to her the postcard, a photo taken of Tsile in 1922. Concerned for her mom's health, Sarah's daughter was cautious about showing her mother the photograph of her long murdered sister; when she did, Sarah immediately began yelling, "That's my sister, that's my sister." The next week I flew to Zurich to meet my cousins and we remain in contact. Sarah died very shortly thereafter, but I had met her and in some ways it was reconnecting with my Grandfather.

I compulsively consumed every piece of literature I could find on Lithuania and the history of Lithuanian Jewry, known as Litvaks. I read the Lithuanian Constitution and discovered that as a grandchild of a Lithuanian citizen, I was entitled to claim Lithuanian citizenship. Here was my chance to give my son a

tangible legal document that was a legal tie to him and his great grandfather, a right that could be passed forward, and a means of preserving the memory of a great man. I decided to apply.

My first visit to the local Lithuanian Consul was personally shocking. The form asked for "nationality" so I was uncertain if I should write down South African or Lithuanian; the Consul's response was that my Nationality was "Jew." I countered that this was my religion, not a "nationality," but he was firm that I was a "Jew," and could not under any circumstance state "Lithuanian." This was historically based upon the "national" concept of population in Europe, much unlike the American system.

I was disturbed, but submitted all required documents. I eagerly looked forward to becoming a Lithuanian citizen, a gift from my Grandfather through the ages, a rite of passage, tangible evidence of heritage. The Lithuanian Migration Department was required to respond in six months, and so they did. Each six month period was met with a request for a new document, sometimes repetitive requests, mostly requests that made no sense to me. Still trustful, I complied, and complied, and complied again. For three years they dragged this out, always asking for more and more documentation, until there was an announcement that the Lithuanian Supreme Court had outlawed dual citizenship.

The denial was dated a week after the court decision and gave three reasons: I hadn't proven that my Grandfather Samuel Gochin was a Lithuanian; I hadn't proven he was my Grandfather; and that dual citizenship was now no longer allowed. The denial offered me a thirty day appeal period, but was given to me 28 days after it was made, only 2 days appeal remaining. To me, this was a deliberate attempt to deny my right to appeal, and after three years I finally realized that I was dealing with a dishonest adversary.



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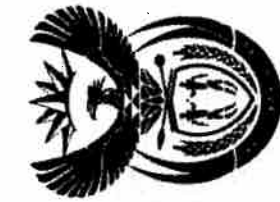
PARTICULARS OF DEATH

**UNABRIDGED  
DEATH CERTIFICATE**

IDENTITY NUMBER: GOCHIN  
 SURNAME: GOCHIN  
 MOTHER NAME: SAMUEL  
 FORENAMES:  
 GENDER: MALE DATE OF BIRTH:  
 PLACE OF BIRTH: LITHUANIA  
 COUNTRY OF BIRTH: LITHUANIA  
 MARITAL STATUS: MARRIED  
 MARRIAGE TYPE: CIVIL MARRIAGE  
 LAST RESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: 106 SAN MICHELLE  
 FORT ELIZABETH

PARTICULARS OF DEATH

*Samuel Gochin's death certificate from South Africa*



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PARTICULARS FROM THE POPULATION REGISTER I.R.O.:

**UNABRIDGED  
BIRTH CERTIFICATE**

CHILD SURNAME: GOCHIN  
 FORENAMES: HAROLD  
 GENDER: MALE DATE OF BIRTH:  
 PLACE OF BIRTH: FORT ELIZABETH  
 COUNTRY OF BIRTH: SOUTH AFRICA  
 FATHER SURNAME: GOCHIN  
 FORENAMES: SAMUEL  
 DATE OF BIRTH: 31 YEARS  
 PLACE OF BIRTH: LITHUANIA  
 COUNTRY OF BIRTH: LITHUANIA

*Harold Gochin's birth certificate from South Africa*

It's often said that standing on principle is unproductive, that the law is there to arbitrate money, and fighting for truth is too expensive. They had shown such disrespect for a man that I adored; principle was the only issue I cared about. My first legal action against the Lithuanian government was to restore my right to appeal, a right they had denied me. I won battle number one. My second legal action was to have Samuel Gochin declared a citizen of Lithuania.

I won legal battle number two. My third action was to have myself recognized as grandson of Lithuanian Samuel Gochin. Battle number three was lost. The court ruled that I could have found military records for a Samuel Gochin and then gone looking for a photo of somebody in that uniform (testimony by the military historian that it was the other way around was disregarded). Their law provides that three letters of testimony confirming citizenship by three Lithuanians is sufficient proof of citizenship – they threw out the three letters saying the authors could not have attended my

Grandfather's birth so their testimony was irrelevant. They claimed there might have been two different Samuel Gochins (one real, one hypothetical), and supposedly I could have been related to "a" Samuel Gochin, but that I hadn't proved that I was related to "the" Lithuanian Samuel Gochin in the documents or a magical, hypothetical, conjured Samuel Gochin of their imagination. So, by those standards, they maintained I couldn't prove any relationship to any Lithuanian citizen. It was the most kafkaesque reasoning that no rational mind could conjure. Obviously it was a decision that had been determined before the case was presented and the court had to somehow find a means to validate their rejection. By any legal standard, this was nonsensical. My impression that Lithuania was a country of laws diminished.

I had no further means of appeal for my citizenship case. I was determined that I would have the courts recognize that my Grandfather was a Jew, a Lithuanian citizen, and that I am his Grandson. For me it was a decision of dignity and respect, versus time and money. The memory of my Grandfather was too important to me to allow these people to deny his existence. There was no property for me to claim and no financial benefit to me - it

was only about respect.

Lithuania has another means of claiming a "Right of Retention of Lithuanian Citizenship," similar to an American Green Card. I added additional documents to the application and hand delivered it to the Lithuanian Embassy in Washington, DC. The Embassy staff confirmed my application was in good order and submitted it to the capital, Vilnius, for processing. This time, the question

of nationality was an optional item on the questionnaire. I exercised my option and proudly, in large capital letters, entered ZYDU (Jew). They took every day of their six months (and more), then responded that the extra documents were not properly notarized, so were rejected for consideration, and again asserted that they would abide by the court decision that Samuel Gochin was a Lithuanian Jew, but that despite my fathers' birth certificate showing that he was the son of Samuel Gochin of Lithuania, and my birth certificate that I am in turn his son, that again, there could have been an invisible Samuel Gochin to which those documents

#### *Grant Gochin in Papile cemetery*

not show that I am the Lithuanian Samuel Gochin's grandson. I am again going to return to the Lithuanian courts. This time I know better than to expect justice. I understand that the legal expense is wasted money, but I want them to have to explain their reasoning in an open courtroom, in the light of day, and again I expect a Lithuanian judge will affirm that this comports to Lithuanian policy.

Instead of offering my son a tangible tie to his great grandfather's memory, I will be able to show him that Jews will not act defenselessly, that he comes from a rich Litvak heritage that can never be denied, and that integrity, dignity and respect are our defining characteristics.

*Grant Gochin resides in Los Angeles with his family. He is a Wealth Advisor at UBS Financial Services in Encino, California, and the Honorary Consul for the Republic of Togo in Africa. Grant sits on the Board of ARZA, and has been honored by numerous Jewish organizations for his work and Jewish involvement. Grant was also appointed Chief of the Village of Babade in Togo for his humanitarian works there. Three of Grant's Grandparents were Litvaks, one was Polish.*

